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# Understanding Racial Differences In Aspiration Realization: Middle Income, Middle Class, And College-Going Behaviors

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**UNDERSTANDING RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN ASPIRATION REALIZATION:  
MIDDLE INCOME, MIDDLE CLASS, AND COLLEGE-GOING BEHAVIORS**

by

**OMARI JACKSON SR.**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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MAJOR: SOCIOLOGY

Approved by:

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Advisor

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Date

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## **DEDICATION**

This project is foremost dedicated to my God. Lofty words could not describe how and why you are my strength.

Secondly, this project is dedicated to my parents: regular, old-fashioned, blue-collar, middle class African Americans. These regular, old-fashioned, blue-collar, middle class African Americans inspired me to somehow achieve what many people never achieve, despite any social location--higher education. I am an example of how love, support, and concern can manifest into aspiration realization. Because of my parents, I am academically successful. Because of my parents, I pursued the doctorate. Because of my parents, I earned the doctorate! I stand on the shoulders of my parents.

Last, but certainly not least, this project is dedicated to all of my former teachers. My kindergarten to eighth grade teachers, at Ralph Waldo Emerson Elementary/Middle School, inspired me to work hard and enjoy learning despite peers making fun of my interest in school. High school teachers, at Lewis Cass Technical High School and Morrow High School, prepared me for college and the business world. Any ounce of determination and motivation that people see in me came from my God, my parents and my teachers. You all taught me that I am owed nothing, yet I can work for everything! Thank you!

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Disparities between African Americans and whites in the United States is well documented. Throughout American history and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century African Americans have attended college at a lower rate than whites (Aud et al., 2013). Although many sociological studies examine race and its correlation with educational attainment, few studies examine race as the primary contributor to educational disadvantage. Rather than suggesting that educational attainment is directly impacted by phenotypic characteristics, studies typically examine the connection between educational attainment and race as mediated by socio-demographic factors, attitudes, and behaviors of students. However, despite attention to the issue of racial disparities in college participation, scholarly literature lacks a good understanding of why African Americans' educational attainment continues to lag behind the college participation rates of whites. Furthermore, it is important to compare African Americans and whites of similar socioeconomic backgrounds to truly highlight racial disparities in college attendance that are not conflated with effects of social class. This dissertation, argues scholarly understanding is inadequate is because there are a dearth of studies that examine the multifaceted nature of class among African Americans. African Americans' claim of membership in the middle class is based on income, whereas whites' claim of membership in the middle class is based on drive for middle class opportunities and a middle class standard of living (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). I enhance Oliver's and Shapiro's argument by arguing that class functions differently for African Americans than it functions for whites, yet scholars



seeking to understand racial differences in college have not adequately acknowledged or examined these differences.

Another important factor in college enrollment that may operate differently for African American and white students is educational aspirations. African Americans' aspirations tend to be high, while their college attendance rates tend to be low. Whereas whites tend to outnumber African Americans in attending college, they do not outnumber African Americans in aspiring to attend college. Instead, most African American children aspire to attend college and most African American parents aspire for their children to attend college (Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009; Jackson, 2011). In fact, African Americans report postsecondary aspirations at higher rates than whites (Cooper, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011), apply to college at higher rates (Turley, Santos, & Ceja, 2007), and have slightly higher degree expectations than white students (Carter, 1999). However, a strong relationship between aspirations and college attendance does not exist for African Americans. Instead, educational aspirations of African Americans are much higher than actual educational attainment among African Americans, meaning that many African American students' aspirations go unrealized (Buttaro, Battle, & Pastrana, 2010). Such disparity between African American students' higher educational aspirations and lower educational attainment has been termed the aspiration-attainment paradox. This dissertation seeks to shed light on the aspiration-attainment paradox by examining the nature of class among African American students. Specifically, this dissertation will determine if a better understanding of class among African American students can lead to

a better understanding of the link between aspirations and college attendance and the role aspirations play in racial disparities in educational attainment.

This study examines the definition of middle class for African Americans. While, poorer African Americans are often chronicled through media and government and exhibit an overt need for assistance, less attention has been paid to middle class African American students as these students are not seen as needing assistance because of their middle class status (Pattillo, 1999). Kaufman (2005) notes that scholars often assume that middle class children will become middle class adults, and less attention is given to the social processes underlying middle class social reproduction, “Middle-class social reproduction has not garnered nearly as much attention and is often understood as a birthright of structural advantages, whereas working-class social reproduction is often viewed through the lens of individual actions (Kaufman, 2005, 265).” This oversight may be particularly problematic when attempting to understand the African American middle class, because middle class African Americans are worse off in a variety of areas and often hold a more precarious position in the middle class than their middle-class white counterparts (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Pattillo, 1999). For instance, Pattillo (1999) speaks about the increased likelihood of middle class African Americans having adult children living in the household. These adult children are often unemployed or underemployed as a result of lack of education and fewer blue collar job options. Parents have to provide for their adult children and many times have to provide for their

grandchildren as well. Often middle class African American families may be just one negative event (e.g., serious illness, lay-off) from poverty.

Moreover, social programs designed to address educational inequality are usually targeted towards lower SES African Americans. These programs either fail to see the need to assist middle class African Americans or are not tailored in a manner that will assist middle class African Americans. For instance, the federally funded Upward Bound program is a college preparatory program for high school students who are low income and/or first generation college students. This program certainly provides necessary resources for minority students, however, it only targets certain schools--those with high percentages of low income and first generation college students. According to the U.S. Department of Education, two-thirds of program participants must be low income and first generation college student status. Resultantly, magnet schools, suburban schools, and private schools are less likely to be eligible. Moreover, only a select number of schools are chosen to participate; so there are a large number of middle class African American students who are not eligible because their school was not chosen.

### **Definitions of Middle Class**

#### **Popular Definitions of Middle Class.**

The media and government often shape public definitions and understandings of social issues. While the term “middle class” is commonly used, such usage comes with much ambiguity. In several political speeches, President Barack Obama has stated that just a few years ago his family was middle class, yet his pre-presidential household

income was more than \$250,000. During these speeches, he has also chronicled the lives of American citizens who are employed in blue collar industries and has used their lives as the face of the middle class. In the 2012 presidential election, both major party candidates defined middle class as those who live in households that earn approximately \$250,000 or less per year. Moreover, the blue collar employee is often the mainstream definition of middle class, determined by the fact that they earn incomes above the official poverty level established by the government – approximately \$23,000 for a family of four. However, the vast majority of blue-collar workers earn incomes far below \$250,000 per year. Media and government definitions of the middle class include families earning between \$23,000 and \$250,000. This definition is convenient for political purposes, because the families in this range may have similarities in terms of taxation. However, this definition clearly obscures substantial heterogeneity in terms of education levels and occupation types, which affect students' academic experiences. For instance, under this definition, it is possible that both an attorney and his/her secretary would be classified as middle class despite obvious differences in the life circumstances of these individuals. This project attempts to look beyond income as a definition of class status and determine the extent to which African American students from lower middle and solid middle class families differ from African American students from upper middle class families. It is argued this distinction may be particularly important for African American families due to the nature of social class among this historically disadvantaged group.

### **Historical Definition of Middle Class.**

Over the years, the definition of middle class has changed for African Americans. Before the civil rights movement, middle class status for African Americans was based on values such as valuing family and community, and behaviors such as serving one's church (Cole & Omari, 2003). This definition is based on values prior to the pre-Civil Rights Movement; as few African Americans attained high levels of income, high levels of education, and professional occupations due to institutionalized, legal discrimination. In the decades following the Civil Rights Movement, there have been more opportunities for African Americans to increase their social status; thereby increasing educational and economic diversity among African Americans. Such diversity creates social inequality among African Americans, which is characterized by certain African Americans receiving access to goods and/or opportunities, while others do not have access to these goods and/or opportunities. While there is probably some present-day application of the subjective definition, more recent literature tends to use objective measures of social class, such as income, occupation, and education.

### **Operational Definition of Middle Class.**

Among studies that attempt to place individuals into specific, discreet social classes, there is no consensus on the operationalization of middle class status. While nearly all researchers use some combination of income, education, and occupation to define middle class status, some utilize just one of these characteristics (Harris & Khanna, 2010; Kalil & Wightman, 2011; Lareau, 2003; Metcalf & Gaier, 1987;

Mossakowski, 2012; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004), whereas others use a combination of these variables (Alexander, Entwisle, Bedinger, 1994; Banks, 2009; Banks, 2010; Kaufman, 2005; Marsh, Darity, Cohen, Casper, & Salters, 2007; Moore, 2008; Pattillo, 2005; Thomas & Hughes, 1986) to operationalize social class. Further, even when researchers base their measures of class on the same characteristics, definitions of who counts as members of the middle class vary widely from study to study.

Some researchers have used only one characteristic to define middle class students. Kalil and Wightman (2011) use the poverty threshold to determine middle class status, defining middle class students as those whose parents earn income between two times the poverty rate and six times the poverty rate. Similarly, Mossakowski (2012) uses the sample median and defines middle class status as parents and children (that are now young adults) that earn more than the median income. Other authors have relied only on occupation to determine middle class status (Harris & Khanna, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Metcalf & Gaier, 1987), in each case defining middle class respondents as parents holding white-collar or managerial employment status.

Given that one important premise of the current study is that the middle class is unique in a variety of manners. This study argues the use of one characteristic alone is inadequate to fully capture middle class status. For instance, the sole use of occupation type is not appropriate because there is a great deal of diversity among white-collar employees. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Compensation Survey classifies executives as well as their administrative assistance as white collar workers.

Thus, while some white collar employees are college educated and may earn high salaries, other white collar employees may only have a high school diploma and likely earn lower salaries than their counterparts with higher levels of education. Similarly, a definition based on income is too narrow, as many African Americans making more than \$35,000 hold blue-collar positions.

Other researchers use a multi-dimensional approach by combining two or more characteristics to determine middle class status. For instance, Moore (2008) defines middle class status as those respondents having both a college education and annual income of more than \$35,000. Kaufman defines middle class as having a college education and earning income between \$45,000 and \$75,000. Banks (2009) defines middle class status as having a college education, white collar job, and a family income that is at least twice the poverty level. Other authors have proposed even more specific definitions by including additional markers of social status to their definitions of middle class status. Marsh et al. (2007) define middle class families as having each of the following: college educated parents, homeownership, a certain income (that varies depending on the number of household members), and a prestigious occupation. Pattillo (2005) defines middle class as two to four times the poverty line, by family size, income, neighborhood of residence, and white collar employment. To date, few scholars investigating the aspiration attainment paradox have questioned how definitions of middle class status may shed light on this paradox.

### **Variations of Middle Class.**

This study argues many African American children who hail from homes with parents earning a relatively successful standard of living through high paying blue collar positions are better classified as lower middle class or solid middle class in comparison to those that are more advantaged (i.e., upper middle class). Accordingly, in this study it is argued middle class membership includes members that are very different, even though they may have similar financial resources. More specifically, the upper middle class is distinct from lower and solid middle classes, which involves the possession of financial resources only or financial resources and white collar employment, respectively. In fact, those classified as lower and solid middle class have more in common with members of the working class because they both lack the resources characterizing the upper middle class. This study will examine how well lower and solid middle class children fare in comparison to upper middle class children, and whether this distinction operates differently for African American students in comparison to white students.

Social class is an important aspect to study when examining educational aspirations and attainment. More specifically, social class is not solely determined by one's household income; as this project hypothesizes that parents' education and occupation play a large role in their children's college preparatory behavior and attitudes. In fact, Hurst (2009) argues that class-based affirmative action programs are necessary, due to disparities in college preparation that persist. Her work highlights the experience of college students from working class backgrounds. Despite coming from middle income families, these students often lack many of the resources that middle class



students possess. She defines working class as households earning less than \$35,000. However, many of the students' values and behaviors (e.g., taking college exams late, visiting colleges, and taking college preparatory courses) may not be linked to the amount of money a student's family has, rather they might be related to resources that are available to them. Accordingly, this project suggests that when implementing class-based affirmative action programs, as Hurst argues, middle income African Americans should be included despite their relatively high incomes because they lack resources that are important in preparing students to attain their aspirations of attending college.

The remainder of this dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews extant scholarly literature regarding the precursors of aspirations, college enrollment, and aspiration realization. Chapter 3 describes the data, sample, measures of variables, and the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 provides the results of bivariate and multivariate analyses. Lastly, chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the current knowledge of educational attainment and describes the contributions of the current study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Explanations of Race and Aspirations**

Overall, African Americans and whites often have similar educational aspirations. However, among lower status African Americans and whites, different parental aspirations and child aspirations persist. Lower SES white parents tend to have lower educational aspirations for their children than lower educated African Americans (Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). Low SES African Americans have high aspirations. However, low SES African American students trail their white counterparts in college attendance, meaning their high aspirations are often unrealized. To better understand variation in the realization of aspirations, it is necessary to examine the consequences of African American students' aspirations. When studying these consequences, one can see that African Americans and whites have different college-going processes. For instance, African American parents, in comparison to white parents, tend to discuss college plans with their children less often and are not as involved in planning their children's high school academic curriculum (Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2007). SES, gender, academic background, attitudes, and knowledge also correlate with students' educational aspirations. Additionally, racial differences in distributions of these factors may also explain racial differences in educational aspirations. Overall, this study aims to look at the factors that decrease African Americans' likelihood of attaining their educational aspirations. Accordingly, the

successive sections review the extant literature on the factors that lead to differences in college aspirations and attendance.

### **Socioeconomic Status.**

A student's SES plays a role in his/her aspirations because SES is linked to personal values (Alexander, Bozick, & Entwisle, 2008; Trusty, 2002). Accordingly, higher SES students are socialized to value academic and extracurricular opportunities that will enhance their aspirations and the likelihood these aspirations will be attained. However, there are differences among studies about the direction of the relationship between SES and educational aspirations. Walpole (2008) found lower SES African American students have higher aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree than higher SES African American students, while Cooper (2009) found above average SES students are more likely, than lower SES students, to have high aspirations (Cooper, 2009). Walpole's findings are anomalous in that most research finds a positive relationship between SES and children's aspirations (Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2007; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Smith-Maddox & Wheelock, 1995; Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). It is possible Walpole found such patterns because the data were obtained in the mid-80s whereas many dissenting studies use more recent data. Accordingly, there may have been a shift in aspiration patterns. While such dissension is important to note, it is not problematic for this study because simply having aspirations is not the crux of this project; rather the (un)realization of aspirations is pertinent. Accordingly, this study examines whether or not different

subgroups of middle class African Americans achieve their aspirations and which factors may play a role in explaining such differences. Parents' backgrounds determine children's SES membership. Such parental background components contribute to advantage or disadvantage in forming college aspirations (Garg, Kauppi, Lewko & Urajnik, 2002).

### **Parents' Education.**

Education is an important component of parents' backgrounds, which plays an important role in children's postsecondary plans. College educated parents know first-hand the benefits of attending college. As the primary agent of socialization for their children, college educated parents are likely to encourage their children to aspire to earn a college degree. Children of college-educated parents are significantly more likely to plan on completing a bachelor's degree (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009). Some research even finds that mothers' education levels affect daughters' educational aspirations specifically. Women are six percent more likely to expect a bachelor's degree if their mother has a college education, men are seven percent more likely to do so if their father has a college education; while father's education has no impact on females and mother's education has no impact on males (Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). Consequently, African American males that are raised by a single mother and African American females that are raised by a single father are disadvantaged. Furthermore, children from single-parent families have lower educational aspirations than children from two-parent families (Garg, Melanson, &

Levin, 2007) and as previously mentioned, African American children are more likely raised by single parents.

Parents' education is also important because it is correlated with parents' occupations and incomes. African American children are disadvantaged, in comparison to whites, because African American parents tend to have lower levels of education, are less likely to hold professional occupations, and are more likely to be single parents (Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2007). Such disadvantages have a negative impact on students' aspirations. For instance, Smith-Maddox and Wheelock (1995) found middle income students' parents, in comparison to low income parents, generally had a better understanding of opportunities that would increase their children's aspirations. However, using income to determine SES membership and predict educational aspirations among African Americans may not be as clear cut; as many middle income African Americans fall in the lower SES stratum due to a lack of parental education. Such lower stratum membership may result in parents lacking an understanding of precollege opportunities that would increase their children's aspirations. Many children have aspirations to attend college because their parents aspire for them to attend college. Subsequent literature shows the role SES plays in parental and children's educational aspirations.

### **Parental Aspirations.**

Parental aspirations also play an important role in children's educational aspirations. Parents instill aspirations in their children, to attend college (Floyd, 1996; Herndon & Hirt, 2004) and if parents have high hopes for their children, children are

more likely to have high hopes for themselves (Bozick, Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber, & Kerr, 2010; Cheng & Starks, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002; Lowman & Elliott, 2010; Trusty, 2002; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). Because middle class African American parents expect their children to earn a bachelor's degree (Wood, Kurtz-Costes, & Copping, 2011), it is not surprising most of these parents' children aspire to earn a bachelor's degree. Unfortunately, the inverse of this relationship is true as well, children with parents that have low aspirations for them (the children) are not likely to have high aspirations for themselves. For instance, of the children with parents that expect the children to attend college, 80% of them expect to attend college. For children with parents that do not expect the children to attend college, only 38.5% of them expect to attend college (Bozick, Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber, & Kerr, 2010). Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, and Umbach (2011) found students whose parents expect them to earn a four-year degree are 38% more likely to earn a college degree than students' parents that do not have such expectations. Furthermore, it is not only important that African American parents have high aspirations, but that African American children perceive their parents to have high aspirations for them; as there is a positive relationship between African American children's aspirations and these children's perceptions of their parents' aspirations (Nichols, Kotchick, Barry, & Haskins, 2010). In a study of middle class African Americans, females tend to have higher aspirations than their parents' aspirations for them, while males' perceived parental aspirations were lower than females' perceived parental aspirations (Wood, Kurtz-Costes,

& Copping, 2011). Accordingly, African American males feel like their parents have lower aspirations, which might contribute to the lower educational aspirations among African American males. These studies highlight the role of parental aspirations as well as perceived parental aspirations in students forming aspirations to attend college.

### **Gender.**

In general, females have more ambitious educational expectations than males (Lowman & Elliott, 2010; Reynolds & Burge, 2008; Strayhorn, 2009) and perceive more encouragement from their fathers for higher education (Reynolds & Burge, 2008). In fact, lower income African American women often state their parents “pushed” them to attend college; whereas males state they were encouraged, but their parents would be equally satisfied if they went to the military instead (Hubbard, 1999). Such experiences highlight a different path, and socialization, for females than males; an academic route versus a non-academic route. As seen, the family plays an important role in socializing males and females. While the aforementioned example highlights lower income families, many factors contribute to different socializations: parental SES (Trusty, 2002; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011), parental involvement (Trusty, 2002; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011), parental expectations (Hout & Morgan, 1975; Trusty, 2002), and perceived parental expectations (Hubbard, 1999; Reynolds & Burge, 2008; Trusty, 2002). These factors contribute to different socialization experiences for males than females. Resultantly, these factors have different effects on males’ and females’ educational aspirations. SES, in terms of parental education levels, is positively

correlated with males' and females' educational aspiration. For instance, women are six percent more likely to expect a bachelor's degree if their mother had a college education, men are seven percent more likely to do so if their father had a college education (Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). In terms of family contributors, parental expectations are positively correlated with males' and females' educational aspirations (Trusty, 2002). However, males' educational aspirations are also positively correlated with SES, parental expectations, parental involvement at home, parental involvement at school, and students' involvement in high school (Trusty, 2002). Additionally, parental encouragement has a stronger effect on African American males' educational expectations than it does on African American females' educational expectations (Hout & Morgan, 1975). Accordingly, African American males, in comparison to African American females, need more family support to increase educational aspirations.

Academic background is another major agent of socialization that influences male and female students. Often, students have different educational experiences that influence their educational aspirations. College preparatory curriculums prepare students to attend college following their high school tenure. These students take more rigorous coursework and all of their academic and social experiences are geared toward preparation for college. These students are more likely to aspire to attend college (Cooper, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011). Females are more likely to be enrolled in high school college preparatory programs than males students are (Reynolds & Burge, 2008; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). Additionally, females tend to have



higher grades than males (Reynolds & Burge, 2008). However, the effect of grades on educational expectations is stronger for African American males than for African American females (Hout & Morgan, 1975). Accordingly, African American males with higher grades are more likely to aspire to attend college; whereas African American females with high grades are equally likely to have aspirations to attend college or not. Furthermore, higher achieving African American females and males speak with greater certainty concerning their future; more specifically academic plans (Honora, 2002). Conversely, lower achieving African American males tend to speak about occupational goals that do not require a college education.

In looking at gender differences in aspirations, this literature review aims to situate my specific interests in African Americans among literature that makes comparisons between African American females and males versus white females and males. In accordance with previously mentioned literature, African American males are generally disadvantaged, in comparison to white males. The same patterns of racial disadvantage exist for females. One disadvantage is mismatch between aspirations and expectations. Extant literature has distinguished between the two: aspirations as education levels that children hope to achieve and expectations as education levels that children actually expect to achieve (Hanson, 1994; Wood, Kurtz-Costes, & Copping, 2011). Females are more likely, than males, to have aspirations that do not match their expectations (Hanson, 1994). Another significant disadvantage is aspiration maintenance. For instance, African American males and females are more likely than

white males and girls, respectively, to have reduced educational aspirations over the course of their high school careers (Cooper, 2009). In the tenth grade, 76% of these students planned to attend college. However, by their senior year of high school, 39% of African American males and females maintained their aspirations to attend college, whereas 55% of white males and 48% of white females maintained their aspirations to attend college. While the percentages of students aspiring to attend college decreased for both races and genders, it decreased most for African American males and females; with the largest gap in reduced aspirations being that of African American males in comparison to white males, 39% and 55%, respectively.

To highlight additional disparities that exist among African Americans, literature highlighting intra-racial comparisons must be presented as well. Such a review highlights the preponderance of disparity existing among African Americans; as African Americans have gendered educational patterns that are counter to other races. For instance, as previously mentioned, as students get older their aspirations become more or less likely to be fulfilled as they get closer to actually attending college or not. White females are more likely to reduce their aspirations than white males; whereas African American males are more likely to reduced their educational aspirations than African American females (Cooper, 2009). Along similar lines, Messersmith and Schulenberg (2008) found that of students that do not expect to earn a college degree, females are more likely than males to remain on a non-graduation track. However, this relationship is different for African Americans; as African American males are less likely to graduate

from high school. Unfortunately, African American males and females do not have the same intentions of even finishing high school; as African American females have stronger intentions of finishing high school than African American males (Williams, Davis, Saunders, & Williams, 2002). Additionally, African American females report higher self aspirations, higher self expectations, and higher perceived parental aspirations (Wood, Kurtz-Costes, & Copping, 2011). Each of these aspiration variables plays an important role in a student's likelihood of eventually attending college. Lacking these aspirations and other social/educational resources, it is not surprising that African American males attend college at a much lower rate than African American females (Aud et al. 2013).

#### **Academic Background.**

This project examines the likelihood of African Americans realizing their postsecondary aspirations. Literature shows academic preparation plays an important role in students' aspirations. This study hypothesizes that such mismatch between academic preparation and aspirations to attend college may contribute to the gap between high educational aspiration and low educational attainment among African American students; as many African Americans aspire to attend college, yet few have college preparation through courses, curriculum/programs, and school choice. Mickelson's 1990 study highlights the difference between postsecondary plans that are rooted in behavior that is in accordance with one's postsecondary plans and behavior that is opposite to one's postsecondary plans. She found students' math achievement is better predicted when concrete attitudes are correlated with achievement, as oppose to abstract attitudes.

Abstract attitudes are values that students subscribe to as a part of dominant ideology; so these values may not be deeply rooted or likely attainable. These values may simply be expressed because students feel that society expects them to possess these values. Concrete attitudes are more attainable in that these values are created by students' life experiences. For instance, "Higher achieving students discussed the future in more concrete terms than lower achieving students. The future was something higher achieving students had considered and in some ways they were attempting to strategize means of reaching their goals (Honora, 2002, 310)." Such an example highlights students' different levels of certainty concerning their future and that variation in such certainty is often based on their achievement. Higher achieving students have strategized plans; whereas lower achieving students often lack plans or have plans that are not well thought out. A student who attends a college preparatory school, or at least takes college preparatory courses, would likely have aspirations of going to college because their experiences have socialized/prepared them to attend college. In Smith-Maddox's (1995) study, only 25% of African American eighth graders who aspired to graduate from college planned to enter a college preparatory program for high school. This numerical minority of students has concrete attitudes; as these students know the importance of a college preparatory curriculum in achieving their aspirations. The aforementioned studies inform this study because they speak to the foundation of one's aspirations; as deeply rooted (concrete aspirations) or not (abstract aspirations). This study argues upper middle class students are more likely to have concrete aspirations and are more likely to

act on these by engaging in college going behaviors (e.g., discussing college plans, taking entrance exams) compared to their lower and solid middle class counterparts and that the difference between these subgroups of middle class students is greater for African American students compared to white students.

Students' academic backgrounds are important when examining postsecondary aspirations. Academic achievement contributes to aspirations (Alexander, Bozick, & Entwisle, 2008; Buttaro, Battle, & Pastrana, 2010; Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, Urajnik, 2002; Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Museus, Harper, & Nichols, 2010; Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009; Strayhorn, 2009; Wilson & Portes, 1975). Enrollment in college preparatory courses/programs also contributes to postsecondary aspirations (Alexander, Bozick, & Entwisle, 2008 ; Cooper, 2009; Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Museus, Harper, & Nichols, 2010; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011). Students enrolled in college preparatory courses, in comparison to vocational and general courses, are more likely to aspire to earn a bachelor's degree (Cooper, 2009); as college preparatory courses/programs have the specific orientation of preparing students for college. Furthermore, there is a positive relationship between student test scores and students' enrollment in a college preparatory track and educational expectations (Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). Accordingly, students in college preparatory tracks have higher test scores and test scores are an important aspect of the college application process. Students are likely taught the importance of exams and this plays a role in their aspirations to attend college.

Race, gender, and class dynamics certainly play a role in enrollment in college preparatory programs. Overall, African Americans are less likely to be in college preparatory tracks (Lowman & Elliott, 2010). In terms of gender, within races, white females and African American females are more likely to be enrolled in college preparatory programs than male students (Reynolds & Burge, 2008; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). While African American parents, in general, are less involved in choosing their child's school or academic curriculum (Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2007), middle class African American parents, in comparison to their working class counterparts, tend to be more involved in choosing their children's school (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). These parents tend to choose magnet schools or other high quality public schools that fit their children's academic needs. Diamond and Gomez assert these parents possess greater knowledge of curriculum and pedagogies. Working class parents want a good education for their children, but often times lack resources that enhance their knowledge of academic opportunities for their children. Additionally, these parents lack confidence and the resources to advocate on their child's behalf. As a result, Diamond and Gomez found a distinctive difference between the schools African American middle class children attend and the schools African American working class children attend. While the aforementioned factors increase students' educational aspirations, literature shows many students who lack these factors aspire to attend college. This study maintains students' possession of the aforementioned academic factors are more likely to realize their aspirations, and that upper middle class African American students will

participate in more college preparatory behaviors than lower and solid middle class African American students.

### **Parental Influence.**

Students' attitudes and behaviors are correlated with educational aspirations. These attitudes and behaviors are largely shaped by parents and students. Parental attitudes are often times expressed through involvement in their children's lives. Parental involvement, in general, is positively correlated with children's aspirations (Cooper, 2009; Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002; Hout & Morgan, 1975; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Trusty, 2002; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbach, 2011). More specifically, students' perceptions of their parents aspirations for them are positively correlated with students' aspirations for themselves (Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002; Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara Barry, & Haskins, 2010). Furthermore, additional parental involvement (e.g., conversations with children about college, children's perceptions of their parents, students' perceptions of parental involvement with homework and school events, and perceptions of educational resources provided by parents) are positively correlated with educational aspirations (Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002). In general, children's aspirations are influenced by fathers (Reynolds & Burge, 2008). However, in African American households, mothers tend to have a stronger influence on children's educational aspirations (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Floyd, 1996).

Parental influence, in a variety of manners, plays an important role in students' postsecondary aspirations. Students' attitudes toward school also play an important role in their aspirations. These attitudes could include students' level of (un)involvement in school. There is a positive relationship between educational aspirations and the amount of time spent on homework and extracurricular activities (Trusty, 2002). Moreover, age plays a role in students' attitudes about school. Bozick et al. (2010) examined the maintenance of aspirations among different SESs. They found that higher SES students maintained postsecondary aspirations, from elementary to high school, at higher rates. From the results of their study, it can be inferred that as students get older their aspirations become more or less feasible; as lower SES students' aspirations decrease.

### **Instrumental Knowledge of Education.**

Parents' and children's instrumental knowledge of education, the degree to which they understand the policies, practices and procedure of the educational system, also plays a role in educational aspirations. More specifically, the knowledge or resources that parents have are imparted to their children. For instance, middle class parents tend to intentionally cultivate their children through high-status cultural activities and these activities are correlated with higher academic achievement (Roksa & Potter, 2011). These parents understand which activities increase their children's achievement, thus exposing them to experiences that play a role in aspirations. In fact, Cooper (2009) found cultural activities at least once a week increased students' likelihood of high aspirations and African Americans are less likely to participate in cultural activities (Roscigno &



Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Roksa and Potter (2011) also found parents' aspirations to play a role in children's academic achievement. Higher parental aspirations result in higher academic achievement. Furthermore, parental aspirations play a role in parental involvement at school (Trusty, 2002). Parents with higher aspirations tend to be more involved at their children's school. These involved parents understand the importance of lining up attitudes with behavior; as their attitudes about college are supported by college preparatory behavior.

While African American children are commonly taught by parents that they must work harder than whites because of existing obstacles (Herndon & Hirt, 2004), many times the parents' behaviors are not in alignment with encouraging their child to aspire to attend college. Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, and Urajnik (2002) found a positive correlation between extracurricular reading and educational aspirations. Parents play an important role in children's extracurricular reading through encouraging such as well as providing books for their children to read. As Roksa and Potter found in their 2011 study, intentionally encouraging one's child to read plays a role in cultivating positive attitudes about college in children. Because African Americans tend to own fewer books/ educational resources at home (Carter, 1999; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999), they are unlikely to have high patterns of extracurricular reading. Kaufman (2005) suggests parents have to actively deploy their cultural capital. Accordingly, a student from a middle class background is not destined to aspire to attend college and actually attend college; rather, parents have to actively engage their children academically. Parents must

be involved in their children's education by guiding and advising them. Messersmith and Schulenberg (2008) state parents should ensure their children have a strong academic preparation, earn high grades, and take advanced courses. They further assert parents must be aware of disadvantages minorities face. This is particularly important for African Americans that may have the economic means to live in suburban areas (thus their children attend suburban schools) and assume because a school is academically exceptional their children's academic needs are being met. Such behavior and concern, about their child's academic well-being, exemplifies a high level of parental involvement. For African American males, higher SES is associated with higher parental involvement at school, but not at home. Accordingly, despite the SES, parents of African American males tend to be less involved in their males academic lives at home. Lack of involvement at home might contribute to lower educational aspirations among African American males.

### **The Link Between Aspirations and College Attendance**

While aspiration research suggests aspirations and college attendance are positively correlated, this study maintains there is a different relationship between aspirations and college attendance for upper middle class African Americans and upper middle class whites as well as lower and solid middle class African Americans and lower and solid middle class whites; that many aspire to attend college, but their aspirations are unrealized. This study suggests unrealized aspirations could be attributed to misclassification of students as members of the middle class, when actually they simply

earn middle class income. Accordingly, there is not a clear definition of middle class. “Middle class” students are studied as a homogeneous population, largely based on income. While many African American parents earn relatively high salaries, or middle class income, they lack middle class resources that are generally correlated with parents possessing a college degree and professional occupation. Such resources have traditionally been positively correlated with college attendance. Lack of these resources likely play a role in unrealized aspirations. Accordingly, this study examines the aspiration realization among African Americans earning middle class income and African Americans that hold middle class status (i.e., income, education, and occupation).

Students of lower SES are at a disadvantage when it comes to having aspirations (Cooper, 2009; Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002). The maintenance of these aspirations and manifestation of these aspirations are different for lower SES students as well. Lower SES students are more likely to have educational expectations that do not match up with their behaviors, and thus they are more likely to experience reduced and unrealized aspirations (Alexander, Bozick, & Entwisle, 2008; Hanson, 1994). Accordingly, lower SES students are less likely to realize their aspirations. Hubbard’s (1999) project highlights lower income students’ educational aspirations and the realization of these aspirations. However, these students were enrolled in a college preparatory program. Moreover, her project is qualitative with a small sample size and some of the children have parents that are college educated and have professional jobs. This critique is not an effort to invalidate her results; rather it is an effort to show the

additional educational mentorship that lower and solid middle class students need because their parents often lack knowledge of the college-going process. Such a critique is also an effort to explain the rationale behind this study's antithetical hypotheses--that lower and solid middle class students will have unrealized aspirations because they lack mentorship and college preparatory programs.

Many African Americans aspire to earn a college degree, but fail to do so (Buttaro, Battle, and Pastrana, 2010). However, the low levels of college attendance among African Americans cannot be attributed to aspirations or a lack of values (Smith, 1989); as African Americans aspire to attend college. Accordingly, additional research is needed to look at factors, beyond values, for low college attendance rates. Furthermore, while some research has found educational aspirations to be predictive of educational attainment, Messersmith and Schulenberg (2008) found aspirations are not sufficient in predicting attainment. Wilson and Portes (1975) found aspirations are significant in predicting educational attainment, but aspirations are indirectly correlated with educational attainment, while SES is directly correlated with educational attainment. This research examines additional factors that are a part of the college-going process; looking at pre-college behaviors and attitudes, among parents and students, to see if certain behaviors and attitudes are related to students' lack of college attendance.

Prior studies have examined these parental and student contributions to the (un)realization of educational aspirations. These studies can largely be divided into three groups: sociodemographic factors, child factors, and parent factors. Sociodemographic

factors are largely factors characteristic of racial groups (Buttaro, Battle, & Pastrana, 2010; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011), gender groups (Buttaro, Battle, & Pastrana, 2010, Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011), and socioeconomic groups (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Trusty & Niles, 2004). Because these characteristics are not directly linked to one's social identity, rather to one's social location, studies that include child factors and parental factors are also presented. Child factors that contribute to aspiration realization include: students' academic curriculum (Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011), academic achievement (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011), personal expectations (Kim & Sherraden, 2011; Merolla, 2013; Reynolds & Burge, 2008), and friends' expectations (Hanson, 1994). Parental factors that contribute to (un)realization of educational aspirations include: number of parents in household (Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011), parental expectations (Merolla, 2013; Trusty & Niles, 2004), and parental involvement (Buttaro, Battle, & Pastrana, 2010).

Sociodemographic variables contribute to aspiration realization, and racial patterns of aspiration exist. Of African Americans and whites that aspired to earn a bachelor's degree, African Americans were half as likely as whites to earn a bachelor's degree as planned (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011). For African Americans, males tend to aspire to a higher level of education than they attain; while African American females tend to hold aspirations that are lower than the education they attain (Buttaro, Battle, &

Pastrana, 2010). In terms of gender, there is some dissension in whether women are more likely to realize their aspirations. Trusty and Niles (2004) find women are more likely than men to realize their educational potential; whereas Reynolds and Johnson (2011) find women are less likely than men to realize their plans to complete a college degree. Some of this dissension could result from the different samples that were used. The former used eighth grade males and females; whereas the latter used 12th grade males and females. Furthermore, the former sampled only children that were gifted, according to reading and math cognitive ability, with college potential. More simply stated, of children with college potential, females are more likely than males to realize their plans. However, when examining children with different levels of potential, as this study does, women may be less likely than men to realize their plans. However, based on the literature that compares African American males and females, this pattern is likely to be different, with African American females having a greater likelihood of realizing their plans than African American males. Messersmith and Schulenberg (2008) even find that men are more likely, than women, to lack expectations to earn a college degree, but actually earn a college degree. As previously mentioned, this gendered trend is not likely for African Americans. SES also presents patterns of aspiration realization. In terms of SES, parental education is not the only factor that plays a role in (un)realized aspirations. However, parental education is an important predictor (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011).

Non-first generation college students are more likely to complete college, even if they did not aspire to do so, than first generation college students (McCarron & Inkelas,

2006; Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) also find first generation college students are less likely to finish college, even when they aspire to finish college. Furthermore, among first generation college students, African Americans are less likely than whites to earn a bachelor's degree. While McCarron and Inkelas (2006) find first generation college males and females are equally likely to attain similar levels of education, this study hypothesizes a different gendered pattern for middle class African Americans. Additionally, Messersmith and Schulenberg (2008) and McCarron and Inkelas (2006) find children with college-educated parents that lack expectations are more likely to graduate from college than their counterparts. This study's hypotheses maintain this trend does not exist with upper middle class and lower and solid middle class African Americans.

Children's factors and parental factors contribute to aspiration realization as well. Grade point average (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011) and friends' value of education (Hanson, 1994) are also important. Generally, higher achieving students have a greater likelihood of realizing their educational aspirations. Students with friends that value education are also more likely to realize their educational aspirations. Enrollment in college preparatory programs/schools increase a child's likelihood of realizing his/her educational aspirations (Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011). In fact, Messersmith and Schulenberg (2008) find students lacking expectations to complete college, but did, are more likely to be in college preparatory courses. Accordingly, children's expectations are not always as predictive as one might think.

Such has been highlighted in the literature that shows high aspirations, but low educational attainment among African Americans. Despite the literature that shows such a paradox, some studies find that students' educational expectations benefited their educational success for African Americans and whites (Merolla, 2013; Reynolds & Burge, 2008). Reynolds and Burge (2008) find that African American and white men and women attained comparable levels of education based on their educational expectations. Furthermore, Merolla (2013) finds that African American and white children with aspirations to attend college are much more likely to attend college than their counterparts that lack college aspirations. Lastly, parental factors contribute to aspiration realization. The parental structure of one's home can influence his/her educational attainment. Children from two parent households are more likely to realize their educational aspirations (Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011). It is possible that the presence of two parents increases finances to afford college and likely increases parental involvement; as parental involvement also increases children's likelihood of realizing their educational aspirations (Buttaro, Battle, & Pastrana, 2010). Furthermore, students are more likely to realize their aspirations if their parents aspire for them to attend college (Merolla, 2013; Trusty & Niles, 2004).

## **Summary and Hypotheses**

### **Summary.**

Education is necessary for upward mobility, or at the very least to sustain class membership. While college attendance rates are low among African Americans in



general, middle class African Americans are of specific interest in this project. Middle class African Americans are at risk for downward mobility. Such downward mobility makes this group unique; as many races see at least the maintenance of middle class status and even upward mobility. Furthermore, this project examines the heterogeneity of middle class African Americans, those with middle class income in comparison to those with middle class resources. Other than Eisele, Zand, and Thomson (2009), little research examines this inner-race difference. This project suggests that working class African American parents can, and often do, earn middle income; yet they do not possess middle class resources. Accordingly, it is hypothesized students who have unrealized aspirations lack pre-college attitudes and behaviors that are necessary.

While students may come from backgrounds with similar economic resources, they are in different social classes because they vary in terms of resources that prepare students for college. In fact, this study hypothesizes college preparatory resources are important predictors of educational attainment, and are responsible for the differences in college attainment for those of similar economic backgrounds. Such a hypothesis answers Smith's (1979) call for further study on white collar African Americans and blue collar African Americans, categorized as members of the middle class. Those that holding white collar positions are more likely to have a college degree and greater knowledge to offer their children about the college-going process. Even more, the study of family capital in educational research is lacking (Parcel, Dufur, and Zito, 2010).

It is common to look at the maintenance of aspirations throughout a student's adolescent years (Cooper, 2009). However, understanding the maintenance of aspirations should not be the end result of studying African American students' educational underperformance. In fact, Cooper suggests as ELS2002 postsecondary data become available future research should study the relationship between educational aspirations and college enrollment. Due to the recent public release of these data, this examination may commence. Further study needs to examine if these aspirations manifest, resulting in African American students attending college.

### **Hypotheses.**

The statistical analyses presented in this study address the following seven hypotheses to clarify the relationships between race, social class, and the realization of aspirations. It is argues lower and solid middle class students are be less likely to realize their aspirations compared to upper middle class students and these differences are due to college-going behaviors. Moreover, it argues the differences between lower and solid middle class in comparison to upper middle class students are larger for African American compared to white students. The following hypotheses are tested:

H1: Upper middle class students are more like to realize their aspirations than solid middle class and lower middle class students.

H2 : White students are more likely to realize their aspirations than African American students.

H3: The differences in realization of aspirations between upper, solid, and lower middle class students are larger for African American students compared to white students.

H4: Upper middle class students are more likely to: a) have high GPAs; b) take college entrance exams; c) engage in discussions about college; d) engage in seeking college information; e) take more rigorous courses; f) have parents that aspire for their children to attend college; and g) home literacy resources than solid middle and lower middle class students.

H5: African American students are less likely to: a) have high GPAs; b) take college entrance exams; c) engage in discussions about college; d) engage in seeking college information; e) take more rigorous courses; f) have parents that aspire for their children to attend college; and g) home literacy resources than white students.

H6: a) Grade point average; b) take college entrance exams; c) parental discussions; d) college information seeking; e) course taking; f) parents' aspirations; and g) home literacy resources will mediate the relationship between race and aspiration realization.

H7: a) Grade point average; b) take college entrance exams; c) parental discussions; d) college information seeking; e) course taking; f) parents'

aspirations; and g) home literacy resources will mediate the relationship between class status and aspiration realization.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

#### **Sample**

The data for this project are drawn from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) collected these data to monitor the transition of students from 10th grade to postsecondary pursuits. Students were surveyed in their sophomore year of high school (2002), their senior year of high school (2004) and two years after high school completion (2006). The longitudinal nature of the ELS data is ideal for investigating aspiration realization because students' 10<sup>th</sup> grade aspirations can be compared to their college seeking behaviors in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and their eventual college enrollment status.

The ELS data come from a nationally representative sample of 10<sup>th</sup> graders, with schools serving as the primary sampling units. 1,221 schools were selected using a stratified probability proportionate to size approach. According to the NCES website (2002), "The public school sample was stratified by the nine U.S. Census divisions, and by urbanicity (metropolitan status of urban, suburban, or rural). Private schools (Catholic and other private) were stratified by four levels of geography (Census region) and urbanicity." Of these 1,221 schools, 752 (62%) agreed to participate in the study. Ninety-two percent of the schools were public, four percent were Catholic schools, three percent were other types of private schools, and one percent was "other" types of institutions. Within each school, a random sample of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students was selected to participate. Of the 17,591 eligible students, 15,362 (87%) completed the base year

survey. Here, I report results for 5,591 white and African American students who had valid responses on all analysis variables.

## **Measures**

### **Dependent Variable.**

The primary outcome variable is aspiration realization, operationalized as the link between students' aspirations and their college attendance status. There are four possible categories for this variable which is constructed by comparing 10<sup>th</sup> grade aspirations to the student's eventual college attendance status in 2006 when they were about 20 years old. *Unrealized aspirations* are observed when a student who aspired to attend college did not attend college. *Over-realized aspirations* are observed when a student who did not aspire to attend college attend college. *Realized non-aspirations* are observed when those that did not aspire to attend college did not attend college. Finally, *realized aspirations* are observed a student who aspired to attend college actually attend college.

To create these categories, educational aspiration from the 10<sup>th</sup> grade (2002) survey was dichotomized with a value of zero for aspiring to less than a college degree and one for aspiring at least a college degree. This binary aspiration measure was then compared to the students college attendance status as of 2006, with one assigned to students who had ever attended college and 0 for those students who did not. Combining these variables created the four categories of aspiration realization described above.

### **Independent Variables.**

### ***Race.***

In this project, I am comparing African American and white students' fulfillment of educational aspirations. African American students make up approximately 19% of the sample and white students make up the remaining 81%.

### ***Class Status.***

As previously shown, "middle class" is an abstract term. It is a status that can include aspects such as one's income, occupation, and/or education level. Given that a primary goal of this project is to better understand how class operates among African American students, I explore several specifications of middle class status. Accordingly, three variations of middle class resulted. These variations are as follows:

*Lower middle class* - High income, neither parent high occupation, neither parent high education

*Solid middle class* - High income, at least one parent high occupation, but neither parent high education

*Upper middle class* - High income, at least one parent high occupation, and at least one parent high education

Initially, the goal was to have a fourth middle class category that consisted of families with high income, at least one parent high education, but neither high occupation. However, there very few cases in this group and multivariate models using this specification of middle class were not identified. Thus, it appears that it is very

unlikely to have a family background with high levels of both income and education without a white-collar occupation for at least one parent among U.S. students.

To create these categories I recoded the base year (2002) ELS variables for family income (BYINCOME), mother's occupation (F1OCCUM), father's occupation (F1OCCUF), mother's education (F1MOTHED), and father's education (F1FATHED) into dichotomous categories. Family income was coded using a cut off of \$35,000 per year. Families earning less than \$35,000 per year were considered low income and families earning more than \$35,001 were considered as high income. \$35,000 was selected because this was the ELS category that was the closest to the median income for African American families in 2002. Both mothers and father's occupation were recoded into dichotomous items. Nonprofessional jobs (such as No job; Clerical; Craftsperson; Farmer, farm manager; Homemaker; Laborer; Military; Operative; Technical) were considered non-middle class occupations. Conversely, professional jobs (such as Manager, administrator; Professional A; Professional B; Proprietor, owner; Protective service; Sales; School teacher; Service) were considered middle class occupations. Likewise, mother's and father's levels of education were recoded into dichotomous variables. Parents with less than a bachelor's degree were considered as having low education, and parents with at least a bachelor's degree were considered as having high education. These three recoded binary variables were used to classify students into the three discrete class categories noted above.

***Mediating Variables.***



All mediating variables are taken from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade survey, administered in 2004. These variables are used to compare precollege behaviors and attitudes among African Americans and whites. These variables are used as mediating variables because these provide an important link between aspiring to attend college and attending college.

The first mediating variable, *High Literacy Resources*, compares those that have no or low home literacy resources to those that have moderate or high home literacy resources. Possible literacy resources are: 50 or more books, daily newspaper, and regular access to magazines. Students who have low home literacy resources are those with one or less of the aforementioned resources in their home. Conversely, students who have two or three of the aforementioned resources in their home are coded as having high home literacy resources. The second mediating variable, *Taken ACT/SAT*, compares those that have taken the SAT or ACT with those that have not taken the SAT or ACT.

*High Parental Discussions* is a composite measure derived from five ELS variables. Each of the original variables uses three point likert-type format and asks the student how often they speak with their parents about: school courses, school activities, going to college, preparing for the ACT/SAT exam, and their grades. The resulting summed measure ranged from five to 15. Students who had values of at least 10 were coded one for high parental discussions.

*High Information Seeking* is measured by combining six dichotomous items that index students who have spoken with 1) a guidance counselor, 2) a teacher, 3) a coach, 4) a parent, 5) a sibling, and 6) an other relative concerning the entrance requirements of

college. A student who reported speaking with at least four of these information sources were coded one for high information seeking.

*Taken/plans to take AP test* is a dichotomous variable that compares students that reported either taking or planning to take an Advanced Placement (AP) exam to those students who reported not planning to take an AP exam.

*Parent Expects College* compares parents that expect their child to earn a college degree (coded “1”) with parents that do not expect their children to earn a college degree (coded “0”).

*Grade Point Average* is operationalized using one dichotomous variable that compares students with a grade point average of 3.01 or higher to all other students. About 38% of the sample reported a GPA of 3.01 or higher.

### ***Control Variables.***

I use several control variables that are important precursors of college attendance: gender, region, location of school, single parent, and number of siblings. *Male* is a dichotomous variable, that compares male and female students. *South* is also a dichotomous variable that compares students in the Southern United States to those in other regions. *Suburban* is a dichotomous variable that compares students attending school in suburban areas to those in other areas (i.e., urban and rural). *Single parent* indexes those students who have only one parent living in their home. Finally, *Only child* indexes those students who do not have siblings.

## **Statistical Analyses**

The first statistical analyses I will conduct will utilize cross-tabulations for the three middle class specifications described above and the four category outcome measure. Such analyses will be done for the entire sample as well as by race, comparing African Americans and whites. This analysis will help determine whether and how the different components of class affect the link between aspirations and college attendance among African American and white students.

The second phase of the data analysis will consist of several multinomial logistic regression models that are used to model the four category outcome measures. The multinomial models will be estimated using the three separate specifications of middle class status, resulting in three main multinomial regression analyses.

To determine the degree to which student behaviors clarify the link between race, social class, and the realization of aspirations, the models will be built in steps with the following independent variables included:

Model 1: Race

Model 2: Race, class (specified as one of nine categories listed above)

Model 3: Race, Class , control variables

Model 4, Race, Class, control variables, mediators

This method will allow for the examination of the mediating variables and can explain observed race and class differences from models 1 and 2. If significant differences are reduced to non-significance, this will provide evidence that college-linking behaviors are important components of the aspiration-attainment paradox. In addition, by exploring varying specifications of class, I will be able to determine whether some specifications of class are more potent predictors of the realization of aspirations and whether the process of aspirations realization varies based on the operationalization of class status.

## Chapter 4: Results

To begin the analysis, Table 1 presents percentages for all analysis variables for the entire sample and for African American and white students separately.

### Univariate Statistics

Table 1 : Descriptive Statistics for Total Sample and by Race

	Total	Black	White
Total	100	19.4	80.6
<i>Independent Variables</i>			
<i>Middle Class Specifications</i>			
Lower Middle Class (1=Yes)	10.1	9.0	10.4
Solid Middle Class (1=Yes)	24.4	17.3	26.1
Upper Middle Class (1=Yes)	35.6	19.0	39.5
<i>Mediating Variables</i>			
High Literacy Resources (1=Yes)	70.6	53.1	74.8
Taken ACT/SAT (1=Yes)	60.7	46.5	64.2
High Parental Discussions (1=Yes)	47.9	39.5	50.0
High Information Seeking (1=Yes)	17.3	17.6	17.2
Taken/Plans to Take AP Test (1=Yes)	24.5	15.2	26.8
Parent Expects College (1=Yes)	59.5	50.3	61.8
GPA over 3.01 (1=Yes)	38.0	14.4	43.7
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Male (1=Yes)	49.8	49.6	49.8
South (1=Yes)	40.4	58.7	36.0
Suburban (1=Yes)	48.4	39.9	50.5
Single Parent Household (1=Yes)	21.8	43.4	16.6
Only Child (1=Yes)	16.3	14.8	16.7

Note: All Numbers are Percentages; See Text for Variable Codings

Source: Educational Longitudinal Study

N=5,591

### **Independent Variables.**

African Americans make up approximately 19% of middle class students in the sample. All of the middle class students come from homes with high household incomes (i.e., above \$35,001). However, they vary based on their parents' employment (neither or at least one parent holds white collar employment) and level of education (neither or at least one parent has earned a college degree). Accordingly, all of the students described as middle-class come from households with high income. Nine percent of African American students are members of the lower middle class--neither parent has a white collar occupation and neither parent has a college degree--in comparison to 10% of white students. Seventeen percent of African American students are members of the solid middle class--at least one parent has a white collar occupation, but neither parent has a college degree--in comparison to 26% of white students. Nineteen percent of African American students are members of the upper middle class--at least one parent has a white collar occupation and at least one parent has a college degree--in comparison to approximately 40% of white students. Thus not surprisingly, African American students are likely to be members of either the solid middle class or upper middle class compared to their white counterparts.

### **Control Variables.**

There is no marked disparity between African American students and white students in terms of gender. Both racial groups have approximately 50% males. African American students are more likely to reside in the South, in comparison to white

students--58.7% versus 36%, respectively. African American students are less likely to attend school in suburban areas than white students--39.9% versus 50.5%. Approximately 43% of African American students are from single parent homes; while approximately 17% of white students are from single parent homes. There is only a small disparity between African American students and white students in terms of being an only child--14.8% versus 16.7%, respectively.

### **Mediating Variables.**

African American students were less likely, than white students, to have a moderate to high level of home literacy resources--53.1% versus 74.8%, respectively. Fewer African American students, in comparison to white students, were likely to have taken the ACT or SAT--46.5% versus 64.2%, respectively. African American students were less likely to discuss schooling and academics with their parents than white students--39.5% versus 50%, respectively. There is a smaller disparity between African American students and white students in terms of the number of people they spoke with when seeking information about college. Approximately 17% of each racial group spoke to four or more people. African American students were less likely to have taken or made plans to take an AP test--15.2% versus 26.8%, respectively. In terms of parental expectation, fewer African American parents think their children will attend college, in comparison to white parents--50.3% versus 61.8%, respectively. African American students are also less likely to have a 3.01 grade point average or higher, in comparison to white students--14.4% versus 43.7%, respectively.

**Summary.**

The largest disparities between African American students and white students exist in the following: solid middle class; upper middle class; each of the control variables, with the exception of gender and number of siblings; and each of the mediating variables, with the exception of talking to people to seek information about college. However, the most notable disparities between African American students and white students are seen in the following: residence in the South (22.7%), single parent household (26.8%), home literacy resources (21.7%), taken ACT/SAT (17.7%), and grade point average (29.3%). Thus, results here underscore that African American students tend to come from households with fewer resources and have less positive academic backgrounds than their white counterparts.



## Bivariate Statistics

Table 2 presents aspiration realization for the total sample and by race, class, and gender status.

Table 2: Aspiration Realization by Race, Class and Gender

	Realized	Unrealized	Over-Realized	Realized
	Aspiration	Aspiration	Aspiration	Non-Aspiration
Total	82.2	7.8	6.2	3.7
Black (1=Yes)	75.3	11.9	7.9	4.9
White (1=Yes)	83.4	7.1	5.9	3.5
Lower Middle Class (1=Yes)	60.6	16.4	9.1	14
Solid Middle Class (1=Yes)	69.2	12.7	8.9	9.3
Upper Middle Class (1=Yes)	88.9	5.1	3.6	2.4
Male (1=Yes)	79.1	8.0	7.7	5.3
Female (1=Yes)	84.9	7.7	5.0	2.5

Note: All Numbers are Percentages; See Text for Variable Codings

Source: Educational Longitudinal Study

N=5,591

Eighty-two percent of the total population realized their aspirations to attend college. There is some disparity between African American students and white students attaining their aspirations. Eighty-three percent of white students realized their aspirations to attend college versus 75.3% of African Americans realizing their aspirations to attend college. The majority of students, despite their level/variation of middle class membership, realized their aspirations of attending college. Once again, all middle class membership is based at least on household income that is excess of \$35,001. Accordingly, all students have at least high levels of income. The further variations of middle class membership, in addition to income, are based on having neither parent or at least one parent that has attained a college degree *and/or* neither parent or at least one

parent that has white collar employment. Upper middle class students are most likely to realize their aspirations to attend college. Approximately 89% of these students realized their aspirations to attend college. Students of the solid middle class are the next most likely to realize their aspirations to attend college. Sixty-nine percent of these students realized their aspirations to attend college. Lower middle class students are the least likely, of the three middle class groups, to realize their aspirations to attend college. Approximately 61% of these students realized their aspirations of attending college. Furthermore, there is some disparity between males and females attaining their aspirations. Seventy-nine percent of males realized their aspirations to attend college versus 85% of females realizing their aspirations to attend college.

Table 3: Aspiration Realization by Race and Class

	Realized Aspiration		Unrealized Aspiration		Over-Realized Aspiration		Realized Non Aspiration	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
Lower Middle Class (1=Yes)	60.0	60.7	20.0	15.6	4.3	10.1	15.7	13.6
Solid Middle Class (1=Yes)	60.4	70.5	18.1	11.9	12.5	8.3	9.1	9.3
Upper Middle Class (1=Yes)	81.9	89.6	8.1	4.8	5.5	3.4	4.5	2.2

Note: All Numbers are Percentages; See Text for Variable Codings

Source: Educational Longitudinal Study

N=5,591

Table 3 presents aspiration realization between African American students and white students by class. Among lower middle class students, African Americans and whites were almost equally just as likely to realize their aspirations with about 60% of each group realizing their aspirations. However, solid and upper middle class whites had higher percentages of aspiration realization in comparison to African Americans of the

same class. Solid and upper middle class whites' rates of aspiration realization are approximately 10% higher than that of African Americans in the same class. While African Americans, in most middle class categories, were generally more likely to have unrealized aspirations and realized non-aspirations, these differences were less than seven percent. For the lower middle class, whites were more likely than African Americans to have over-realized aspirations, by approximately six percent. However, for the solid and upper middle classes, African Americans were more likely to have over-realized aspirations, by approximately four percent and two percent, respectively. It is important to note lower middle class African Americans and solid middle class African Americans have the same rate of realized aspirations. However, this pattern is not true for whites; as there is a consistent increase in aspiration realization for those in a higher class.

Table 4: Mediating Variables by Aspiration Realization

	Lower Middle Class	Solid Middle Class	Upper Middle Class
Moderate/High Literacy Resources (1=Yes)	9.6	25.3	40.7
Taken ACT/SAT (1=Yes)	8.4	23.7	47.2
High Parental Discussions (1=Yes)	8.6	24.1	44.5
High Information Seeking (1=Yes)	7.8	23.5	44.9
Taken/Plans to Take AP Test (1=Yes)	6.0	19.2	56.4
Parent Expects College (1=Yes)	8.1	23.3	45.8
GPA over 3.01 (1=Yes)	8.3	22.8	50.0

Note: All Numbers are Percentages; See Text for Variable Codings

Source: Educational Longitudinal Study

N=5,591

Table 4 provides an overview of the mediating behaviors that students of each class possess. In comparing the different classes, students in the lower class were least likely to possess the mediating behaviors. While upper middle class students possessed more

mediating behaviors, the behavior that was most prevalent to lower and solid middle class students--home literacy resources--was least prevalent to upper middle class students. Furthermore, the behavior that was most prevalent to upper middle class students--taken/plans to take AP test--was the least prevalent to lower and solid middle class students. This table, much like the previous tables show quite a bit of similarity between lower and solid middle class students as well as quite a bit of dissimilarity when comparing those of the lower and solid middle classes to those of the upper middle class.

## Multivariate Statistics

Table 5 shows odds ratios for multinomial logistic regression models that operationalize middle-class status as middle class income only with neither parent having a college degree or a white collar occupation. For all the multinomial models, realized aspirations serve as the reference category for the dependent variable and all odds ratios are compared to this reference category.

Table 5: Odds Ratios from Multinomial Logistic Regression of Aspiration Realization: Lower Middle Class

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	UN	OR	RN	UN	OR	RN	UN	OR	RN	UN	OR	RN
Black (1=Yes)	1.852 ***	1.473 **	1.541 *	1.876 ***	1.485 **	1.554 *	1.566 **	1.488 **	1.23	0.981	0.994	0.788
Lower Middle Class (1=Yes)				2.083 ***	1.721 **	1.672 *	2.236 ***	1.799 **	1.99 **	1.535 **	1.086	1.041
Moderate/High Literacy Resources (1=Yes)										0.953	0.58 ***	0.693 ***
Taken ACT/SAT (1=Yes)										0.167 ***	0.346 ***	0.07 ***
High Parental Discussions (1=Yes)										0.489 ***	0.596 ***	0.365 ***
High Information Seeking (1=Yes)										0.987	0.857	0.631
Taken/Plans to Take AP Test (1=Yes)										0.569 ***	0.384 ***	0.417 **
Parent Expects College (1=Yes)										0.574 ***	0.195 ***	0.14 ***
GPA over 3.01 (1=Yes)										0.446 ***	0.749 ***	0.33 ***
Male (1=Yes)							1.142	1.701 ***	2.395 ***	0.913	1.368 ***	1.511 *
South (1=Yes)							1.563 ***	0.739 *	0.888	1.574 ***	0.733 *	1.206
Suburban (1=Yes)							1.111	0.93	1.131 **	1.075	0.906	1.431 *
Single Parent Household (1=Yes)							1.328 *	1.379 *	1.813 ***	0.976	1.054	1.552 *
Only Child (1=Yes)							1.035	1.517 **	0.822	1.093	1.851 ***	1.490

Note: Reference Group for Dependent Variables is Realized Aspiration

UN= Unrealized Aspiration; OR= Over Realized Aspiration; RN=Realized Non-Aspiration

\* p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

Source: Educational Longitudinal Study

N=5,591

Model 1 shows the unconditional effects of race. Model 1 shows that African American students are approximately 1.9 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations relative to their white counterparts. Additionally, African American students are approximately 1.5 times more likely to have over-realized aspirations, and are approximately 1.5 times more likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to their white counterparts. These unconditional patterns are consistent with the literature discussed above which generally shows that there is a disconnect between African American students' aspirations and their college attendance patterns. Specifically, these unconditional models indicate that African American students are both less likely to realize their aspirations compared to white students, but are also more likely to attend college when they do not aspire to do so.

Model 2 adds the middle class status variable. The addition of this specification of middle class status does not substantively change the effects of race. In model 2, African American students are approximately 1.9 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations relative to their white counterparts. African American students are approximately 1.5 times more likely to have over-realized aspiration and are approximately 1.6 times more likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to their white counterparts. Using this operationalization, middle class students (high income, but neither parents having white collar occupations and neither parents having college degrees) are approximately 2.1 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations. Moreover, these middle class students are also 1.7 times more likely to have

over-realized aspirations and are 1.7 times more likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to other students. These patterns from Model 2 indicate that students who come from families with middle incomes, but who lack other resources are not advantaged in terms of aspiration realization.

Model 3 adds the control variables. In Model 3, African American students are approximately 1.6 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations. Further, African American students are approximately 1.5 times more likely to have over-realized versus realized aspirations relative to their white counterparts. However, with the addition of the control variables, African American students are no longer more likely to have realized non-aspirations than their white counterparts. After adding the control variables, lower middle class students (high income, but neither parents having white collar occupations and neither parents having college degrees) are approximately 2.2 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations compared to other students. These lower middle class students are also 1.8 times more likely to have over-realized aspirations and are approximately two times more likely to have realized non-aspirations compared to other students. Sex was not a significant predictor for realized versus unrealized aspirations, however, sex was a significant predictor of over-realized aspirations and realized non-aspirations. Specifically, males are 1.7 times more likely to have over-realized versus realized aspirations. Moreover, males are approximately 2.4 times more likely to have realized non-aspirations than female students. Southerners are approximately 1.6 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations

relative to their non-Southern counterparts. Additionally, Southerners are approximately 30% less likely to have over-realized aspirations relative to their non-Southern counterparts.

Whether or not a child's school was located in a suburban area was only a significant factor when comparing realized non-aspirations to realized aspirations. Students in one parent households are 1.3 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations. Moreover, students in one parent households are 1.4 times more likely to have over-realized aspirations and are 1.8 times more likely to have realized non-aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations, relative to students in two parent households.

Model 4 adds the mediating variables. This pattern indicates that differences in college seeking behaviors are important for understanding why African American students are less likely to see a link between their college aspirations and college attendance. Further, after adding the mediating variables, membership in the lower middle class is not a significant predictor of over-realized aspirations or realized non-aspirations. However, lower middle class students are approximately 1.5 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations after entering the mediating variables. Thus, while the mediating factors fully explain racial differences in aspiration realization, these variables do not fully explain differences based on social class status.

Students with a high amount of literature resources at home are 42% less likely to have over-realized versus realized aspirations compared to students with a low amount of

literature resources. Students with a high amount of literature resources at home are 31% less likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to students with a low amount of literature resources.

Whether or not a student took the SAT or ACT is significantly related to aspiration realization. Students who took the SAT or ACT are 83% less likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations. Moreover, students who took the SAT or ACT are 65% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and 93% less likely to have realized non-aspirations compared to students who have not taken the SAT or ACT. Students who have a high level of discussion with parents about college are 51% less likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations relative to students who have a low level of discussion with parents about college. Students who have a high level of discussion with parents about college are 40% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and 63% less likely to have realized non-aspirations.

Whether or not a student has a high amount of college information seeking behaviors is not significant for any category of aspiration realization. Students who either have taken or plan to take an AP test are 43% less likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations relative to students who have not taken or do not plan to take an AP test. In addition, students who have taken or plan to take an AP test are 62% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and are 58% less likely to have realized non-aspirations.

Students with parents that expect them to attend college are 43% less likely to have unrealized versus realized relative to students with parents that do not expect them



to attend college. Students with parents that expect them to attend college are 80% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and 86% less likely to have realized non-aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations, relative to students with parents that do not expect them to attend college. Students with a high grade point average are 55% less likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations relative to students with parents that a low grade point average. Moreover, students with a high grade point average are 25% less likely to have over-realized aspirations, and are 67% less likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to students with parents that a low grade point average.

In full, the mediating factors of literacy resources, standardized test taking, discussing college with parents, GPA, AP exam taking, and parental aspirations are strong consistent predictors of aspiration realization. Students who come from homes with high levels of literacy resources, who take standardized tests, who have high GPAs, who take AP exams and whose parents expect them to attend college are likely to have realized college aspirations and are less likely to be in any of the other three categories on the aspiration realization outcome measure.

### **Comparison of Models.**

Table 6 shows models parallel to Table 5, except the operationalization of middle class includes students who have a middle income and at least one parent with a white collar occupation with neither parent holding a college degree. Model 1 in Table 6 is identical to Model 1 in Table 5.

Table 6: Odds Ratios from Multinomial Logistic Regression of Aspiration Realization: Solid Middle Class

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	UN	OR	RN	UN	OR	RN	UN	OR	RN	UN	OR	RN
Black (1=Yes)	1.852 ***	1.473 **	1.541 *	1.911 ***	1.549 **	1.548 *	1.626 **	1.546 **	1.253	0.986	0.994	0.788
Solid Middle Class (1=Yes)				1.34 **	1.581 ***	1.043	1.419 ***	1.673 **	1.208	1.179	1.42 **	1.036
Moderate/High Literacy Resources (1=Yes)										0.941	0.574 ***	0.693 *
Taken ACT/SAT (1=Yes)										0.168 ***	0.346 ***	0.07 ***
High Parental Discussions (1=Yes)										0.484 ***	0.591 ***	0.362 ***
High Information Seeking (1=Yes)										0.978	0.854	0.632
Taken/Plans to Take AP Test (1=Yes)										0.558 ***	0.389 ***	0.42 **
Parent Expects College (1=Yes)										0.563 ***	0.196 ***	0.14 ***
GPA over 3.01 (1=Yes)										0.45 ***	0.751 *	0.329 ***
Male (1=Yes)							1.143	1.715 ***	2.383 ***	0.913	1.375 **	1.504 *
South (1=Yes)							1.548 ***	0.745 *	1.176	1.575 ***	0.743 *	1.204
Suburban (1=Yes)							1.12	0.934	1.516 **	1.079	0.906	1.426 *
Single Parent Household (1=Yes)							1.283	1.405 *	2.394 ***	0.955	1.109	1.558 *
Only Child (1=Yes)							1.059	1.551 **	1.185	1.106	1.873 ***	1.472

Note: Reference Group for Dependent Variables is Realized Aspiration

UN= Unrealized Aspiration; OR= Over Realized Aspiration; RN=Realized Non-Aspiration

\* p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

Source: Educational Longitudinal Study  
N=5,591

Model 2, adds the middle class variable. Similar to Table 5, the addition of the middle class status measure does not markedly change the effects of race. African American students remain approximately 1.9 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations, African American students are also approximately 1.5 times more likely to have over-realized aspirations and 1.5 times more likely to have realized non-aspirations.

Solid middle class students (high income, at least one parent having a white collar occupation, but neither parents having college degrees) are approximately 1.3 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations relative to other students. These solid middle class students are also 1.6 times more likely to have over-realized aspirations. However, membership in the solid middle class was not a significant predictor of realized non-aspirations versus realized aspirations.

Model 3 adds the control variables. After adding these variables, African American students are approximately 1.6 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations. African American students are also approximately 1.5 times more likely to have over-realized aspirations. However, race is no longer significant in predicting realized non-aspirations after adding the control measures. After adding the control variables, solid middle class students are approximately 1.4 times more likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations and are 1.7 times more likely to have over-realized aspirations. However, students' membership in the solid middle class was not significant for students who realized non-aspirations.

The effects of the control variables are similar to those in Table 5. Males are 1.7 times more likely to have over-realized versus realized aspirations and approximately 2.4 times more likely to have realized non-aspirations. Southerners are approximately 1.5 times more likely to have unrealized aspirations and have over-realized aspirations. Students in one parent households are 1.4 times more likely to have over-realized aspirations and are 2.4 times more likely to have realized non-aspirations.

The effects of the mediating variables are similar to those in Table 5. However, students with a high amount of literature resources at home are 43% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and 31% less likely to have realized non-aspirations. Whether or not a student took the SAT or ACT is also significantly related to aspiration realization. Students who took the SAT or ACT are 83% less likely to have unrealized aspirations. Further, students who took the SAT or ACT are 65% less likely to have over-realized

aspirations compared to students who have not taken the SAT or ACT. Students who took the SAT or ACT are 93% less likely to have realized non-aspirations.

Much like Table 5, college preparatory behaviors have significant effects in Model 4. Specifically, students who have a high level of discussion with parents about college are 52% less likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations. Moreover, students who have a high level of discussion with parents about college are 41% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and are 64% less likely to have realized non-aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations, relative to students who have a low level of discussion with parents about college.

Whether or not a student has a high amount of college information seeking behaviors is not significant for aspiration realization. Students who have taken or plan to take an AP test are 44% less likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations compared to students who have not taken or do not plan to take an AP test. Students who have taken or plan to take an AP test are 61% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and 58% less likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to students who have not taken or do not plan to take an AP test.

Students with parents that expect them to attend college are 44% less likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations relative to students with parents who do not expect them to attend college. Students with parents that expect them to attend college are 80% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and 86% less likely to have realized non-aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations, relative to students with parents

that do not expect them to attend college. Students with a high grade point average are 55% less likely to have unrealized aspirations, 25% less likely to have over-realized aspirations, and 67% less likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to students with parents that a low grade point average.

Table 7 presents models parallel to Tables 5 and 6; except that in Table 7 middle class status is operationalized as having a high income, at least one parent with a white collar occupation, and at least one parent with a college degree.

Table 7: Odds Ratios from Multinomial Logistic Regression of Aspiration Realization: Upper Middle Class

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	UN	OR	RN	UN	OR	RN	UN	OR	RN	UN	OR	RN
Black (1=Yes)	1.852 ***	1.473 **	1.541 *	1.455 **	1.193	1.187	1.277	1.26	0.981	0.9	0.951	0.753
Upper Middle Class (1=Yes)				0.204 ***	0.274 ***	0.161 ***	0.198 ***	0.27 ***	0.159 ***	0.371 ***	0.567 ***	0.506 **
Moderate/High Literacy Resources (1=Yes)										1.016	0.608 ***	0.733
Taken ACT/SAT (1=Yes)										0.189 ***	0.371 ***	0.076 ***
High Parental Discussions (1=Yes)										0.495 ***	0.603 ***	0.367 ***
High Information Seeking (1=Yes)										0.983	0.857	0.635
Taken/Plans to Take AP Test (1=Yes)										0.615 **	0.409 ***	0.44 **
Parent Expects College (1=Yes)										0.622 ***	0.21 ***	0.15 ***
GPA over 3.01 (1=Yes)										0.456 ***	0.752 *	0.332 ***
Male (1=Yes)							1.235 *	1.82 ***	2.598 ***	0.98	1.427 **	1.579 **
South (1=Yes)							1.609 ***	0.758 *	1.225	1.615 ***	0.74 *	1.23
Suburban (1=Yes)							1.126	0.941	1.528 ***	1.086	0.913	1.438 *
Single Parent Household (1=Yes)							1.035	1.135	1.957 ***	0.864	1.006	1.479 *
Only Child (1=Yes)							1.014	1.499 **	1.141	1.075	1.818 ***	1.452

Note: Reference Group for Dependent Variables is Realized Aspiration

UN= Unrealized Aspiration; OR= Over Realized Aspiration; RN=Realized Non-Aspiration

\* p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

Source: Educational Longitudinal Study

n=5,591

Model 1 presents the unconditional effects of race which is identical to those in Tables 5 and 6. Model 2 adds the effects of middle class status. In model 2, African American students remain approximately 1.5 times more likely to have unrealized aspirations in comparison to realized aspirations. Upper middle class students (high income, at least one parent having a white collar occupation and at least one parent having a college

degree) are approximately 80% less likely to have unrealized aspirations and are 73% less likely to have over-realized aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations, relative to their lower middle class and solid middle class counterparts. Upper middle class students are 84% less likely to have realized non-aspirations. Comparing the effects of this operationalization to the operationalizations used in Tables 5 and 6, suggests that class status operates differently for aspiration realization when it is operationalized using all three status characteristics. Specifically, only when upper middle class status is used do we see middle class students as more likely to realize their aspirations compared to other students.

Model 3 shows that once control variables are added, race is no longer significant for students who have unrealized aspirations, over-realized aspirations, or realized non-aspirations. The addition of the control variables does not however, alter the effects of upper middle class status. Specifically, upper middle class students are approximately 80% less likely to have unrealized aspirations, 73% less likely to have over-realized aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations, and 84% less likely to have realized non-aspirations.

The effects of the control variables are similar to those in Tables 5 and 6. Males are 1.2 times more likely to have unrealized aspirations and 1.8 times more likely to have over-realized aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations relative to their female counterparts. Males are also approximately 2.6 times more likely to have realized non-aspirations compared to female students. Southerners are approximately 1.6 times more

likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations, however, Southerners are approximately 24% less likely to have over-realized aspirations. Students in one parent households are two times more likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to students in two parent households.

Moreover, model 3 shows that mediating variables do not explain the effects of class status for any comparison on the dependent variable. Upper middle class students are 63% less likely to have unrealized aspirations, 43% less likely to have over-realized aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations, and 49% less likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to other students. This pattern indicates that the mediating factors cannot explain the advantage that upper middle class students enjoy for aspiration realization.

Whether or not a student has a high amount of literature resources is not a significant predictor of either unrealized aspirations or realized non-aspirations. However, students with a high amount of literature resources at home are 39% less likely to have over-realized aspirations relative to students with a low amount of literature resources. Whether or not a student took the SAT or ACT is significantly related to aspiration realization. Students who took the SAT or ACT are 81% less likely to have unrealized aspirations, are 63% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and 92% less likely to have realized non-aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations, relative to students who have not taken the SAT or ACT. Students who have a high level of discussion with parents about college are 50% less likely to have unrealized versus

realized aspirations relative to students who have a low level of discussion with parents about college. Further, students who have a high level of discussion with parents about college are 40% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and are 63% less likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to students who have a low level of discussion with parents about college. Whether or not a student has a high amount of college information seeking behaviors is again not significant for aspiration realization.

Students who have taken or plan to take an AP test are 38% less likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations relative to students who have not taken or do not plan to take an AP test. Moreover, students who have taken or plan to take an AP test are 59% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and are 56% less likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to students who have not taken or do not plan to take an AP test. Students with parents that expect them to attend college are 38% less likely to have unrealized aspirations. Students with parents that expect them to attend college are also 79% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and 85% less likely to have realized non-aspirations, in comparison to realized aspirations, relative to students with parents that do not expect them to attend college.

Students with a high grade point average are 54% less likely to have unrealized versus realized aspirations relative to students with parents that a low grade point average. Students with a high grade point average are 25% less likely to have over-realized aspirations and 67% less likely to have realized non-aspirations relative to students with parents that a low grade point average.



## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

Political figures, and others, often use the term “middle class” to classify individuals in society. While this term is widely used, the definition and implications are abstract because they do not help us better understand this group’s identity. Policymakers create programs to support members of the lower class and not members of the middle class. Political figures and policymakers are largely basing their definition of the middle class on a family’s income. In accordance with policymakers and political officials, many African Americans consider themselves middle class based on their income (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). However, within this income-based definition, great heterogeneity exists; as many African American “middle class” students suffer from the same disadvantages as lower class students. This project shows the aspiration realization disparity between those with only high income; those with high income and white collar employment; versus those with high income, white collar employment, *and* high education. Highlighting such heterogeneity for middle income students, in terms of aspiration realization, shows the increased need to provide greater social/academic support for those that are often times misclassified as middle class and seen as advantaged over their lower income peers.

The major themes in this study were race, class, and aspiration realization. Basic analyses showed that there are differences between African American students and white students, in terms of aspiration realization. There are also differences between upper middle class students and lower and solid middle class students, in terms of aspiration

realization. It is important to note that while the below discussion speaks about the diminishing effects of race, race is still an important predictor of college-going resources; as seen in the bivariate tables. Thus, a key conclusion for this study is that while whites are more likely to realize their aspirations of attending college, African American students who have similar economic, social, and academic resources are just as likely to realize an aspiration to attend college as their white counterparts. Lastly, there are existing disparities between races and classes in the possession of college-going behaviors. Ultimately, this study found that African Americans are just as likely to realize their aspirations, as whites, as long as they have either the same college-going resources or are members of the upper middle class. Again, it is important to note that I am not interpreting such to mean that race does not matter. Instead, the analyses presented here paint a clear picture that shows the reasons why African Americans are less likely to realize their college aspirations than their white counterparts.

## **Discussion**

### **Role of Race and Class.**

This project largely examined class and race as correlates with the realization of aspirations. The first and second hypotheses examined these two variables separately. The first hypothesis investigates the correlation between class and the realization of aspirations. Accordingly, it was expected that upper middle class students are more likely to realize their aspirations than lower and solid middle class students. Results show that upper middle class students are more likely than lower and solid middle class students to

realize their aspiration. Lower middle class students are least likely, of all middle class groups, to realize their aspirations. Approximately 89% of upper middle class students realize their aspirations of attending college, while 69% of solid middle class students realize their aspirations and approximately 61% of lower middle class students realize their aspirations. Thus there is a positive association between one's class membership and his/her likelihood of realizing aspirations. The second hypotheses investigated the correlation between race and the realization of aspirations. It was expected that white students are more likely to realize their aspirations than African American students. Results supported this hypothesis as well, as 83% of the white students realized their aspirations compared to just 75% of African American students.

The third hypothesis examined class and race together. This hypothesis is intersectional; as it seeks to investigate the difference between classes, but within race. It was expected that the differences in realization of aspirations between lower, solid, and upper middle class students are larger for African American students in comparison to white students. This hypothesis received mixed support by the data. Specifically, there was greater disparity between whites when looking at the differences between the lower middle and solid middle classes and when comparing the lower middle class with the upper middle class. However, for African American students, results showed that there were almost no differences between the lower middle class and solid middle class, but a large difference between the solid middle and upper middle classes. For both races, one's likelihood of realizing his/her aspiration is greater if he/she is in a higher class. There is

approximately 29% difference between white students of the lower and upper middle class students. Additionally, there is 19% difference between white students of the solid and upper middle class students. For African Americans, there is approximately a 22% disparity between solid and upper middle class students. However, there is less than one percent disparity between lower and solid middle class students. Accordingly, class membership is not as predictive of realizing aspirations for African Americans as it is for whites. African Americans of the solid middle class are not advantaged in comparison to African American students of the lower middle class. Additionally, African Americans of the solid middle class and upper middle class are not equally as likely as whites within the same social class to realize their aspirations.

**Race and Class: Patterns of Academic Background and College-Going Behavior.**

While race and class are certainly important correlates with aspiration realization, mediating variables play an important role in explaining race and class differences in aspiration realization. The mediating variables characterize students' academic backgrounds and college-going behaviors. It was hypothesized that upper middle class students, in comparison to lower and solid middle class students, are more likely to have: 1) more rigorous academic backgrounds (e.g., higher GPAs, taken or plans to take SAT/ACT, and take more rigorous courses); 2) higher levels of college-going behavior (e.g., engage in discussion about college and seek college information); and 3) more parental resources/support (e.g., home literacy resources and parents who expect the student to

attend college). It was also hypothesized that African Americans will be less likely to have the above mentioned characteristics.

The fourth hypothesis, concerning class difference in the mediating variables is supported by these data. Social class was indeed correlated with each of the above mentioned characteristics. Lower middle class students were least likely to have these characteristics. Solid middle class students were the next likely to have these characteristics. Upper middle class students were most likely to have these characteristics. In fact, the disparity between classes on these mediating characteristics is quite large. The lower middle class was characterized by very low levels (i.e., less than 10%) of academic rigor, college-going behaviors, and parental resources/support. Typically, the solid middle class had anywhere between 19% and 25% participation in each of the mediating characteristics. The upper middle class had much higher participation in each of the mediating characteristics, in comparison to lower and solid middle class students. Its participation generally ranged from 40% to 56%. The greatest disparity between the social classes is whether a student has taken or plans to take an AP test. This was the most common mediating characteristic among upper middle class students. However, this was the least common mediating characteristic among lower and solid middle class students. Interestingly, the most common mediating characteristic among lower and solid middle class students--home literacy resources--was the least common mediating characteristic among upper middle class students. While the solid middle class is more advantaged, in terms of mediating characteristics, there is a quite a

bit of similarity between the lower and solid middle class when speaking about characteristics that are most or least prevalent.

The fifth hypothesis, concerning racial difference on the mediating factors, was largely supported by these data. Only one component of the hypotheses is not true. Students' college information seeking behavior did not vary by race. Approximately 17% of African Americans and whites have a high level of seeking college information. However, disparities exist between African Americans and whites in terms of academic backgrounds, college-going behavior (e.g., engaging the in discussion about college, but *not* seeking college information), and parental resources/support. The largest disparity between African Americans and whites is students' GPA. Approximately 44% of white students have a GPA of 3.01 or higher, while only 14% of African Americans have a GPA of 3.01 or higher. The next two largest disparities between African Americans and whites are with home literacy resources and if a student has taken or plans to take the ACT/SAT--approximately 22% and 19% difference, respectively. While disparities exist in the remaining mediating variables--parental aspirations, taken/plans to take AP test, discussion of college--these disparities are smaller (i.e., less than 11%).

### **Academic Background and College-Going Behavior in Predicting Aspiration Realization.**

The final two hypotheses are multivariate. These hypotheses examine the major premise of this study--better understanding patterns of aspiration realization between races and classes. They test whether or not variables in the following categories mediate

the relationship between race and aspiration realization as well as class and aspiration realization: academic backgrounds, college-going behavior, and parental resources/support. The sixth hypothesis examined whether or not variables from the aforementioned categories mediated the relationship between race and aspiration realization. The seventh hypothesis examined whether or not variables from the aforementioned categories mediated the relationship between class and aspiration realization.

The vast majority of the aforementioned variables did mediate the relationship between race and aspiration realization as well as class and aspiration realization for members of the lower and solid middle classes. College information seeking was the only variable that did not mediate the relationship between class and aspiration realization or the relationship between race and aspiration realization. Accordingly, it was not significantly related to the realization of aspirations. Whether or not a student sought college information did not assist in determining whether or not he/she would attain his/her aspirations. Additionally, a high level of home literacy resources assisted in mediating the relationship between class and aspiration realization and race and aspiration realization, but to a lesser degree than other variables. This variable became even less of a mediator for upper middle class students than it was for lower and solid middle class students. Mediating variables became less important for upper middle class students; as the middle class resources were still significant after mediators were added to

the model. Accordingly, upper middle class students, in comparison to lower and solid middle class students, are more likely to realize their aspirations.

Most notably is the differences between the lower and solid middle class specifications and the upper middle class specifications. For the lower and solid middle class specifications, the addition of the class measures did not reduce the effects of race substantially. Only when the mediating factors were considered was the effect of race explained. However, for the upper middle class specification, the addition of the class variable alone explained racial differences in aspiration realization. This pattern underscores the importance of how class is defined. If we ask the question, of whether there are racial differences in aspiration realization among ‘middle class’ students the answer depends on how middle class status is defined. The analyses above show that if we rely on income, or income and occupation to define middle class status, racial differences remain after controlling for class. However, if we use income, occupation and education to define middle class status, class status completely explains racial differences in aspiration realization.

Results then indicate two main paths for middle class African American students to achieve their desired level of schooling. First, for students in the lower and solid middle class categories differences in college preparation and academic background are largely responsible for differences in aspiration realization. However, for upper middle class students, these mediating factors were less important than simply coming from a more advantaged background situation. Notably, only 19% of African American students



came from upper middle class backgrounds compared to nearly 40% of white students. These differences in family backgrounds, rooted in a history of racism and discrimination, continue to disadvantage African American youth in terms of academic attainment.

## **Conclusion**

It may not be surprising that African American students as well as lower and solid middle class students are less likely to realize their aspirations. However, findings here highlight the heterogeneity of the middle class. Furthermore, when these levels of middle class are compared by race, light is cast upon the fact that African Americans tend to occupy the lower levels of middle class and have fewer college-going resources. Accordingly, class does not function the same for African Americans as it does for whites. Currently, there are social programs aimed at assisting poorer African Americans with college preparation. However, existing programs should broaden their target group, to include lower and solid middle class African Americans; as the majority of “middle class” African Americans are members of the lower and solid middle class subcategories while the majority of “middle class” whites tend to be members of the upper middle class subcategory.

The historical social conditions of African Americans contribute to the current social conditions. Students in the ELS sample were born in the mid 1980s, it is likely that the parents of these students were born into the era of legal segregation. During times of segregation, college-going resources were legally withheld from African

Americans who were educated in substandard schools and had little chance of attending college. As expected, many of the African American parents in this study have not earned a college degree; and multivariate analyses found that possessing a college degree is the major defining mark of one's children realizing their aspirations. Students who are not members of the upper middle class are disadvantaged in comparison to children that are members of the upper middle class. While segregation is no longer legal, the results of this study show that segregation still exists--in terms of resources. The upper middle class, which is disproportionately white, has resources that the lower and solid middle classes, which are disproportionately African American, do not possess. We have seen, with the generation of the parents, the results of a lack of resources. Accordingly, many of these students have inherited their parents' disadvantage. We can only expect that this disadvantage will continue and possibly become worse in successive generations. If programs are not established to eliminate such segregation of resources, these students' children will likely be in a worse social condition because of transformations in the work force, from an industrial society with an abundance of unskilled blue collar work to a post industrial society with an abundance of skilled white collar labor opportunities. For the students that did not go to college, their chances of securing a blue collar job that even places them in the lower middle class (by simply earning a high income) are low; as high paying blue collar jobs are on the decline. Additionally, even if they by chance earn a high salary doing blue collar labor or a high salary doing white collar work, their education levels are low; and as previously mentioned parental education plays an

important role in increasing/decreasing a child's chance of realizing aspirations to attend college.

There is not a shortage of literature on African Americans' educational pursuits. We know that African Americans tend to have aspirations to attend college. We know that African Americans' educational aspirations tend to be much higher than their educational attainment (Buttaro, Battle, & Pastrana, 2010). While we know this aspiration-attainment paradox exists, we know little about how this paradox characterizes middle class African Americans more than middle class whites. My study fills this gap, studying a disenfranchised group that is viewed by society as self-sufficient.

Literature that examines the intersections of class and race found that middle class African Americans are disadvantaged and are at greater risk of downward mobility than their middle class white counterparts (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Pattillo, 1999). Because of the increased likelihood of downward mobility among middle class African Americans, but not their white counterparts, my study highlights a population that is too often ignored in terms of social/academic support. Part of the lack of attention given to this group is because the definition of middle class is so abstract, such that most people fit into the "middle class." Even scholarly literature defines "middle class" in different fashions. Some researchers have stated that middle class membership is based on one's household income (Kalil & Wightman, 2011; Mossakowski, 2012). Some researchers have stated that middle class membership is based on the type of occupation one holds (Harris & Khanna, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Metcalf & Gaier, 1987). Some researchers have

stated that middle class membership is based on one's income and education (Moore, 2008). Other researchers have stated that middle class membership is based on one's income, occupation, and education (Banks, 2009; Marsh et al. 2007; Pattillo, 2005). I chose to take a multifaceted approach, to defining "middle class," as did the latter mentioned studies. This approach enabled me to see the stratification that exists in this elusive "middle class." In fact, my analyses showed that the two lowest subcategories of middle class--lower middle and solid middle--shared some commonality and there was not much disparity in terms of college-going behaviors/attitudes, thus there was not much disparity in realizing their aspirations. However, members of these two groups were markedly different than members of the upper middle class. Accordingly, I do not feel it is proper to refer to members of these three groups as members of the "middle class." I feel as though the upper middle class, is characterized by high rates of college-going behavior/attitudes as well as high rates of aspiration realization. To speak about these members as a homogenous group takes away their unique identity that deserves unique attention and support. In fact, because society has conflated members of these groups, we have hindered possible upward mobility of these members due to lack of participation in programs that they desperately need. Simply put, it is not only students who live in poverty that need additional support, but also students who are members of the lower and solid middle classes.

While previous literature has provided insight about African Americans and their educational aspirations, much is still misunderstood about middle class African

Americans. For instance, Kaufman (2005) highlights the fact that scholars are mistaken in assuming middle class children will automatically become middle class adults. However, data show that middle class African American children are even less likely than middle class white children to ‘automatically’ become middle class adults; as fewer African Americans in each middle class subcategory are likely to realize their aspirations of attending college. My work builds on Kaufman’s work in three ways. First, my project carefully examines the multifaceted nature of the middle class, which few studies do. Second, in having a better grasp of the heterogeneity of the middle class I have found that members of the upper middle class have an advantage, but the lower and solid middle classes are disadvantaged. Third, the African American middle class is different than the white middle class in that they tend to occupy the lower rungs of the “middle class.” Accordingly, some middle class students are more likely to become members of the middle class through their increased likelihood of attending college and others are less likely because of their decreased likelihood of attending college. As previously mentioned, those without a college degree are not likely to even claim membership in the lower middle class; as high paying blue collar jobs are much less prevalent in today’s economy compared to when these students’ parents were entering the workforce.

While I am not suggesting aspirations are not important, I am suggesting that there are mediating variables that play a role in actually achieving those aspirations. In fact, Messersmith and Schulenberg (2008) found that aspirations alone are not sufficient in predicting college attainment. Furthermore, Wilson and Portes (1975) found that

aspirations are indirectly correlated with college attainment. I maintain that these mediating variables are concrete behaviors and attitudes that increase students' likelihood of attending college. My work furthers these arguments; largely making the claim that aspirations are likely to predict college attendance for upper middle class students, but to a much lesser extent predict college attendance for lower and solid middle class students. Furthermore, I am suggesting that aspirations, when held in conjunction with high levels of the aforementioned mediating variables, are likely to be realized. Honora (2002) and Mickelson (1990) speak about the roles concrete attitudes play in students' academic lives. Honora speaks more about students that have more concrete attitudes speak more clearly and definitively about their future educational endeavors. Mickelson speaks more about how students' math achievement is correlated with concrete attitudes. While neither of these studies speak to the realization of aspirations, they hone in on the same types of attitudes and behaviors that I am suggesting increase students likelihood of realizing their aspirations. Accordingly, my study builds on their idea of concrete attitudes and behaviors and applies it to the study of aspiration realization.

While many African Americans base their membership to the middle class on their high levels of income (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006), my work suggests that income alone is a poor predictor of aspiration realization. Essentially, African Americans are experiencing a form of false consciousness by thinking their children are advantaged when they are almost just as disadvantaged as poorer African Americans. My work builds upon Oliver's and Shapiro's discussion of middle class for African Americans and

highlights the disadvantage that African Americans, with only high income, face. Hurst (2009) studied students from backgrounds with only high levels of income, she found that many of them lack the mediating variables that predict aspiration realization. While her small number of interviewees did attend college, they are outliers. A much larger sample size was utilized in my project. My sample shows that students similar to her interviewees typically realize their aspirations of attending college at a much lower rate than upper middle class students. Much like Hurst, I argue that class-based affirmative action programs are needed and that programs, such as Upward Bound and GEAR UP, should not automatically consider high earning household to be very different from low earning families, especially for African Americans.

In summary, this study highlights diversity within the middle class. Accordingly, the middle class is not a monolithic group of privileged; rather it is a group of privilege *and* disadvantage. This study shows a group can be similar in terms of income, but worlds apart in terms of resources and life chances, specifically accomplishing educational aspirations. While African Americans who have the same economic, social, and academic resources are just as likely, as whites, to realize their aspirations, few African Americans have the same resources as whites; even when they have similar economic resources. Moreover, class operates differently for African Americans than it does for whites. For whites, one's social class is more predictive of aspiration realization than it is for African Americans. The higher white students' social class, the more likely they are to realize their aspirations. However, African American students who are

members of the solid middle class are not more likely than lower middle class African Americans to realize their aspirations. It is membership in the upper middle class that increases African American students' likelihood of realizing their aspirations.

This project is a good start to the study of middle class African Americans' educational pursuits. It gives a sound, practical definition of middle class membership. It also highlights disparities between members of different subcategories within the abstractly defined concept of "middle class" as well as disparities between African Americans and whites, of the same middle class subcategory. However, this project is not without certain limitations. This project aimed to examine aspiration realization, but does not fully examine whether or not students have realized their aspirations. Students were asked, "As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will get?" There is an option for students to select, "Attend college, 4 - year degree incomplete." However, this study utilized students selection of "Graduate from college" as the marker of college attainment. During the third wave of data collection, students were only out of high school for two years, so that many may be enrolled in college, but we cannot be sure they finished; which would be the actual measurement realizing their actual aspirations. Because a successive wave(s), which would have given better insight, was/were not available, I used the best estimate--enrollment in college. Additionally, wealth is an important aspect in whether or not students attend college. This study does not have any measure of wealth and does not take it into account as a factor that contributes to one's class status. Some measure of wealth, such as homeownership, could help estimate the



stability of families as well as the ability to pay for their children to attend college. Such a measure would make my definition of middle class status more valid. Lastly, the conception/definition of class could be enhanced by including additional parental factors (e.g., leisure activities, financial preparations made for children's college tuition, etc.). Greater context about parents could also lend credence to aspiration realization.

There is much room for future research in this area as well. As previously mentioned, it is necessary to study whether or not these middle class African American students finish school; as college completion is key to upward social mobility. This is seen in the results of this study; as having a college education was the defining marker between being upper middle class or not. One must remember the host of advantages mentioned in this study that students are equipped with when they have parents with a college education. While data concerning college completion are not available at the time of this study, they should be available in the very near future. As one can see, the multinomial logistic regression models in this project are very dense, in that they provide much information about aspirations that are not realized. It would be interesting to study in more detail each remaining categories--those that did not realize their aspirations, those that attended college without aspirations to attend college, and those that did not aspire to attend college and did not attend college. Moreover, qualitative research could add to the findings of this study. This type of methodology would be especially interesting for students that realized their aspirations, did not realize their aspirations, or over-realized their aspirations. Accordingly, researchers could explain why students feel

they were (un)able to achieve their aspirations. Additionally, students could explain why they over-realized aspirations. There is a paucity of literature that does speak about students that aspire not to attend college, but actually attend college. According to such literature, these students tend to come from higher social classes. Because such literature tends to be quantitative, it is unable to speak to students' understandings about their educational attainment, despite contradictory aspirations. Future study could see how these students process their lived experiences and over-realize their aspirations. Finally, African American students' patterns of aspiration-attainment should be compared to those of other racial groups. This study uses whites as a reference group. However, other groups may have higher levels of aspiration realization that should be seen as the ideal pattern of aspiration-attainment, thus serving as a reference group for African Americans.

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**ABSTRACT****UNDERSTANDING RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN ASPIRATION REALIZATION:  
MIDDLE INCOME, MIDDLE CLASS, AND COLLEGE-GOING  
BEHAVIORS**

by

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It is well documented that African Americans attend college at a lower rate than whites. However, African Americans' rate of aspiring to attend college is not lower than whites; rather their aspirations are higher than those of whites. Because there is such disparity between African American's educational aspirations and attainment, further investigation into this paradox is necessary. Literature shows that membership in the middle class generally equips one with greater resources that prepare them for college. If such research is accurate, middle class African American students should possess college preparatory resources and attend college. Because this is not the case, and the paradox exists, the current project examines the heterogeneity of the middle class and the role that such heterogeneity plays in the distribution of resources. Utilizing data from the Educational Longitudinal Survey 2002, 2004, and 2006, students were divided into three groups: lower middle, solid middle, and upper middle classes. Such divisions show

disparities in resources, which are linked to students' realization of their aspirations to attend college. Accordingly, the common usage of middle class nomenclature includes people that are very dissimilar. In fact, the majority of middle class African Americans tend to occupy the lower rungs of the middle class, lacking most college preparatory resources. If we deny the heterogeneity of the middle class, many social programs will continue to ignore this group, rendering it self-sufficient and not in need of assistance from social programs.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Omari Jackson was born to Lavon and Geraldine Jackson and raised in Detroit, Michigan. Growing up in Detroit's Northwest corner, he attended Ralph Waldo Emerson Elementary/Middle School, from kindergarten to eighth grade. He then matriculated to Lewis Cass Technical High School, where he majored in Business Administration. In the middle of his high school studies, his parents moved from Detroit to Ellenwood, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. His junior year of high school was spent at Morrow High School. While he succeeded academically, he found himself less successful in the social arena. There is no place like home. As a result, his parents allowed him to return to Detroit for his senior year of high school, under the supervision of his aunt--Joyce Barbara Pierce. Such a return was likely the catalyst for Omari eventually attending The University of Michigan and having the most awesome time possible.

It was at Michigan that Omari became interested in all things sociology, but saw majoring in the discipline as a route to law school. However, God had another plan. After two unsuccessful bouts with the law school application process, he reflected on his undergraduate experiences. It was his experience as a student researcher (in the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program) for the Institute for Social Research, under the supervision of Dr. Rosemary Sarri, that inspired his interest in research. His second research position, as an assistant for the then "Nadia"...now "Dr. Nadia Kim," also inspired him to stick with research. As a resident advisor, in Bursley Hall--5th Sanford to be exact--Omari found a passion for working with people. This position, challenged him to step out of his comfort zone and become the outgoing person that many people might see today. Finally, as a student-teacher in the Project Community program at Michigan, Omari got his hands wet with the art of teaching and was hooked. God did and always does create the perfect plan.

So, here Omari is, at 31 years of age, completing the long road to the doctorate. Life happened, in a great way, along the way to the doctorate. As a young graduate student, he planned to complete the doctorate, then get married and have children. Well, God presented Omari with his wife just a couple years after beginning graduate school. When beginning to think about family planning, Omari sought advice from a mentor of his, Dr. Lesley Reid. He wondered if having a child would be a roadblock to earning the doctorate. Her advice was sound--that one will always be working toward the next step...tenure, full professorship, etcetera. According, God ushered a son into Omari's and Kanika's lives. His birth, and Kanika's spending habits, were motivation for finishing the doctorate.

Equipped with this big degree, Omari plans to continue researching middle class African Americans and their educational pursuits. He hopes to advocate for funding that will be used to support this targeted population and increase their college-going behaviors and eventually their college graduation rates. Furthermore, he wants to continue teaching academic success strategies to first generation college students.